

Consumer response to cause-related sport sponsorship: does gender matter?

Abstract

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, this research contributes to an understanding of the effects of the emerging area of cause-related sport sponsorship (CRSS) on consumer perceptions and responsiveness in terms of sponsor interest, favourability, and intended purchase. Second, this investigation examines the potential influence of gender at all stages of the sponsorship process through a comparison of grouped samples that include spectators of men's versus women's sport, and cancer-cause versus social-cause affiliated events. A proposed framework highlights multiple paths of possible influence for both women and men to process sponsorship factors and to respond at the various levels of effect. The answer to whether gender matters in CRSS was discovered to be highly contextual and reflective of complex relationships that are not only based on differences but also on equally important similarities between genders.

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INTRODUCTION

The modern marketing landscape is dynamic and in a perpetual state of evolution. Tied to social trends and changing consumer attitudes and behaviours, marketing strategies must be quickly adapted to new marketplace realities. Sponsorship is often overlooked in mainstream marketing discourse despite the fact that it has rapidly become a preferred strategy to engage consumers and to realize various business objectives (Delia & Armstrong 2015). Sponsorship is a growing industry that represents over \$62 billion in global investment (IEG 2017). Sport remains the most prominent form of sponsorship while growth is also observed in other areas such as entertainment, causes, and arts (IEG 2017; O'Reilly, Beselt, & Degrasse 2017). As the industry matures, the various types of sponsorships are beginning to merge (such as sports with causes) and are effectively blurring the traditional understanding of sponsorship marketing.

Given the prominence of sport, early sponsorship research efforts were mainly grounded in the context of sport (Quester & Thompson 2001). Furthermore, sport has traditionally been male-dominated and therefore a significant portion of sponsorship knowledge has been derived through investigations of male sports and male consumers with little consideration for women's sports or for women as targets of sponsorship efforts (Lough & Irwin 2001). Over the past decade, some needed attention has started to shift to women in the sponsorship industry (Dodds, DeGaris, & Perricone 2014; Maxwell & Lough 2009). A synthesis of reviewed literature suggests that this focus toward female interests can be attributed to three main influences. The first is that gender is among the most relied upon consumer segmentation variable. Gender (in the context of biological sex) is an objective variable that is sizeable, identifiable and reachable through

marketing campaigns (Crane et al. 2017). The second factor driving interest in the female market is the increased recognition of the influence of women and the corresponding profit potential of engaging this lucrative consumer segment (Barletta 2006). Finally, evidence of fundamental gender differences in consumer behaviour has effectively captured the attention of sponsorship scholars and practitioners who realize the need to adapt marketing strategies to reflect these significant distinctions (Dodds et al. 2014; Goodrich 2014; Green & Antoine 2011).

The purpose of this research was to contribute to an understanding of the effects of the emerging area of cause-related sport sponsorship (CRSS) on consumer perceptions and responsiveness in terms of sponsor interest, favourability, and intended product use. Furthermore, the potential influence of gender at all stages in the sponsorship process was investigated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature supports the legitimacy of sponsorship as an integral element of the promotional mix (Seguin & O'Reilly 2007; Slåtten et al. 2017). Corporate investment in sponsorship continues to grow while the nature and managerial expectations have evolved in terms of complexity as well as sophistication. Today's sponsorship is no longer a pure philanthropic gesture of goodwill but rather it is an important strategic business-building approach that is capable of realizing significant corporate objectives, necessary consumer effects, and socially demanded goodness (Cahill & Meenaghan 2013; Djaballah, Hautbois, & Desbordes 2017; Gwinner, Larson, & Swanson 2009).

While several forms of sponsorship exist, the unique intensity, drama and emotion of sport render this the dominant choice of sponsors and an ideal gateway to consumer passion and engagement (Bal, Quester,

& Plewa 2009). According to IEG (2017), sport sponsorship represents 70% of North American sponsorship spending. Sport has long been used to reach and engage avid male athletes and sport fans. It was not until the 1990s that savvy marketers began to recognize the untapped opportunity to connect with the increasingly lucrative female market through the uncluttered and progressively meaningful medium of sport (Kell 2014; Shani, Sandler, & Long 1992). The role of gender in response to sponsorship efforts however remains unclear (Dodds et al. 2014; Pegoraro, O'Reilly, & Levallet 2009; Wheeler 2009). Cause sponsorship is reportedly also enjoying a surge in both consumer and corporate interest (IEG 2017; Johnston 2010). Goodness is indeed required and rewarded for organizations that truly commit to long-term, fitting partnerships that leverage or enhance the emotional involvement of consumers (Fortunato 2013; Plewa & Quester 2011; Pope 2010). Benefits to the nonprofit sector distinguish cause from other types of alliances and compound the potential for meaningful consumer engagement (Hyllegard et al. 2011). There remains ample opportunity to better understand consumer response to these growing cause marketing efforts (Geue & Plewa 2010; Lacey, Close, & Finney 2010; Walker & Kent 2009). The merging of sponsorship types is a trend that is gaining significant momentum as sponsors seek to deliver exponential consumer impact (Fortunato 2013; Roy 2011). For instance, the societal importance, massive reach and emotion of sport render it a natural conduit to goodness (Walker & Kent 2009; Watt 2010). This unity of business, sport, and cause is increasingly common and effective at communicating shared values and delivering mutual gain for all involved parties. Sponsorship effects in such increasingly popular settings however remain under-investigated (Chang 2012; Djballah et al. 2017). Pharr and Lough

(2012) acknowledged that although CSR has been the focus of academic research since the early 1980s, CSR in sport has only recently begun to receive research attention.

Theories relating to the need for congruency (Chien, Cornwell, & Pappu 2011; Close & Lacey 2013; Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley 2010) and the process of image transfer (Grohs & Reisinger 2005; Gwinner et al. 2009; Meenaghan 2001) as well as perceived sponsor sincerity (Alay 2008; Chang 2012; Speed & Thompson 2000) are well developed and supported throughout the sponsorship literature. Consumer involvement is also identified as an important moderator of sponsorship effects and is considered a multi-dimensional construct that can significantly vary by consumer segment (Alexandris & Tsiotsou 2012; Ko et al. 2008). Funk et al. (2001) suggested that involvement can be gender-based and that women may respond more favourably to opportunities to be involved with and/or support other women. Evidence of gender solidarity was noted throughout the reviewed literature with findings suggesting that women trust other women and seek to support female sports and causes (Bennett et al. 2007, Edwards & La Ferle 2009; Ridinger & Funk 2006). Whether gender solidarity is a factor in female sponsorship response has not yet been investigated thereby establishing a meaningful line of inquiry.

Researchers strongly advocate for further strategic evaluation of sponsorship efforts. Simply relying on awareness measures is generally regarded as insufficient to accurately capture the potential consumer impact of modern sponsorship campaigns (O'Reilly & Madill 2009). The hierarchy of effects model is a prominent theoretical framework used to measure consumer response to sponsorship at the cognitive, affective, and behavioural stages (Chang 2012; Filo, Funk, & O'Brien 2010; Hyllegard et al. 2011; Lacey et al. 2010;

Walker & Kent 2009). Furthermore, the Sponsorship Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) is a valid and reliable measurement of consumer response to sponsorship. Speed and Thompson (2000) introduced this questionnaire with a student sample in Australia while Alay (2008) employed this same tool with female students in Turkey. There is a need to extend the international applicability of these measurement tools in new markets and evolving sponsorship settings while also involving potential consumers in lieu of convenient student samples. Much of the current understanding of sponsorship has been derived from experimental settings prompting appeals for greater external validity through realistic field-based studies (Close & Lacey 2013; Gwinner et al. 2009). Presuming that involvement levels are elevated by sheer event attendance, Kinney, McDaniel, and DeGaris (2008) encourage on-site data collection.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

This inquiry was grounded in the theoretical framework originally introduced by Speed and Thompson (2000) and later extended and validated by Alay (2008, 2010). Adopting a classical conditioning framework, Speed and Thompson (2000) tested six independent variables as determinants of sponsorship response (measured by the three dependent variables of interest, favorability and use). Alay (2008) added two additional independent measures (attitude to event and image of sponsor) for a total of eight independent variables measuring the same three levels of sponsorship response in accordance with the hierarchy of effects model. These earlier investigations confirmed significant relationships between these factors and sponsorship response.

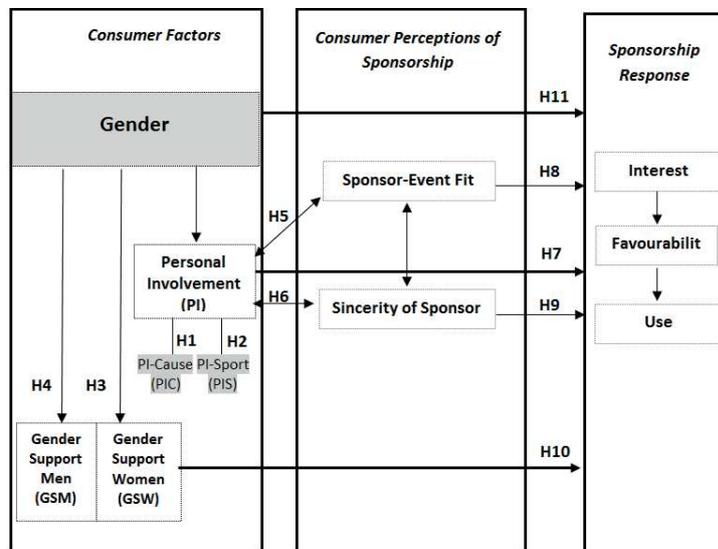
The proposed framework omits variables strongly supported in previous models (such as status of event, attitude to

sponsor, image of sponsor and ubiquity of sponsor) in order to introduce and focus on consumer elements proposed to be of particular importance to a female audience and previously unexamined in the proposed sponsorship setting of cause-related sport. Gender was the principal component driving this inquiry and, as such, all proposed relationships in the sponsorship process were tested for significant gender influence. Personal involvement was also central to this proposed framework and was considered on two levels: i) involvement with the sport, and ii) involvement with the cause. It is important to note that earlier models also acknowledged forms of personal relevance or involvement (i.e., personal liking of event, attitude to event) under the grouping of "event factors". Given the multidimensional nature of involvement as well as potential gender interactions with this variable, involvement in this model was considered as a separate consumer construct that mediates consumer perceptions and ultimately consumer response to sponsorship. An extensive review of sponsorship literature did not reveal any studies that considered the influence of gender solidarity on sponsorship response. The importance of gender support however was strongly conveyed through efforts in the areas of marketing to women, sport management, and cause marketing and was therefore introduced in this model as a possible influence on sponsorship outcomes. Sponsorship factors included sponsor-event fit and perceived sincerity of the sponsor and were preserved as in past models given the importance of these variables in previous studies. Sponsorship response was the final stage of this examined process and measurement of these outcomes conformed to the well-established hierarchy of effects model. Consumer cognition was measured through interest in the sponsor, affection was assessed through sponsor favourability,

and behavioural effects were tracked through consumers' intended use of the sponsor's offerings.

There are three categories of variables from which the hypotheses for this study were formed. These categories include: a) consumer factors (gender, personal involvement with the sport, personal involvement with the cause, gender support for women, gender support for men), b) sponsorship factors (sponsor-event fit and perceived sincerity of the sponsor), and c) sponsorship response (interest, favourability and use). Guided by the reviewed literature, eleven hypotheses were developed. Each proposed relationship was also tested for possible gender influence in an effort to highlight any significant differences between the processing and response of women and men in the context of this cause-related sport sponsorship investigation. These hypotheses are detailed in the results section of this paper (see Table 1) and reflected in the conceptual framework of consumer processing of CRSS presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Consumer Processing of CRSS - Hypothesized Relationships



RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to contribute to the latest understanding of sponsorship marketing, this study was designed to: i) intercept consumers at the point of field-based sponsorship consumption, ii) focus specifically on the emerging practice of cause-related sport sponsorship, and iii) secure balanced input from both women and men in order to allow for meaningful gender comparisons.

Measurement Scales

Measurement scales were adapted from previously validated research. A 25-question survey included demographic profiling (gender, age, income range and number of children) as well as measures of cause involvement (Bennett et al. 2007), sport involvement (Alexandris & Tsiotsou 2012; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman 2004), gender support (Cornwell & Coote 2005) and sponsor-event fit, perceived sincerity, and sponsorship response (Speed & Thompson 2000; Alay 2008, 2010). Apart from the four demographic profile questions (measured as nominal data), all items were measured on five-point Likert interval scales anchored by

Strongly Disagree (1) and Strongly Agree (5).

Research Participants and Data Collection

Participants of this study were spectators at a variety of charity-linked hockey events taking place during the period of October to December 2013 across three different cities in Ontario, Canada. Respondents were consenting adults (i.e., minimum of 18 years old) and included representation of both male and female spectators. Natural field settings are an emerging method to examine the realistic dynamics of sponsorship and event-based marketing (Bennett, Ferreira, Lee, & Polite 2009; Close & Lacey 2013; Maxwell & Lough 2009). A key objective of this research was therefore to capture consumer perceptions at the point of sponsorship consumption. With a focus on the growing trend of sporting events associated with charitable causes, many possible opportunities were considered and efforts made to gain access for the purpose of data collection. Five suitable events were confirmed and included two women's hockey games and three men's games and spanned three levels of hockey including collegiate (i.e., Ontario University Athletics), major junior (i.e., Ontario Hockey League), and professional (i.e., National Hockey League). While the investigated sport of hockey was constant at all events, the associated charities involved a range of cancer and social-related causes.

Procedures

Participant recruitment took place through event intercepts (upon entry to the game, during intermissions, in common areas, and upon exit). A team of trained research assistants were employed to support in the collection of data. A research table was set up in the main entrance and was hosted by at least two members of the research team. Other data collectors roamed approved areas to recruit as many suitable participants as possible to complete the survey. Spectators were first screened

to ensure that they were of minimum age (i.e., 18) and then invited to complete the brief survey with an estimated completion time of 5-10 minutes. All interested individuals were assured of the voluntary and confidential nature of this study and presented with a consent form that was explained by the researchers. Willing participants were then given the option to complete the questionnaire through paper format or through an e-survey accessible through iPads carried by members of the research team. Approximately 30% of respondents opted for the e-questionnaire.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In order to thoroughly address the research hypotheses, analyses were performed with several sample treatments. These included: i) the total all-events sample (n=633), ii) spectators of women's hockey events (n=197) versus spectators of men's hockey events (n=436), iii) respondents at cancer-cause events (n=257) versus respondents at social-cause events (n=376), and iv) attendees at the five individual CRSS events. Both women and men were part of each investigated spectator sample. The all-events sample offered a broad view of findings with the greatest number of respondents and balanced gender representation while the individual event samples provided unique perspectives and contrasting features. The gender of sport being played was also an important consideration in this investigation of gender effects. As such, women's hockey and men's hockey samples were distinguished. As a final level of investigation, the various causes linked to these events were grouped into two broad categories: cancer-cause events and social-cause events. Exploring the data from these multiple perspectives extended the platform of potential discovery and offered a deeper understanding of outcomes.

Statistical tests were relied upon to explore differences between investigated samples

(i.e., independent sample t-tests and observed values of z) and to assess the presence of hypothesized relationships (i.e., Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression model testing). This study investigated many (i.e., seventeen) relationships across a total of ten different sample groups. Some hypotheses were supported across all investigated samples (i.e., H5a, H6a, H7a, H8a, H9a) while others were fully rejected (i.e., H2, H4, H8b, H9b, H10b). There were also cases of mixed results, as expected outcomes were realized with some sample groups but rejected by others (i.e., H1, H5b, H6b, H7b, H11). Table 1 itemizes the relationships, analytical procedures, and results of each individual hypothesis.

Table 1: Summary of Findings from Tested Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Relationships	Analyses	Results
H1: Females are more highly involved with cause (PIC) than males at charity-linked sporting events.	Gender → PIC	T-Tests	Supported (all-events, men's hockey, social-causes, event 5) Not Supported (women's hockey, cancer-causes, events 1-4)
H2: Males are more highly involved with sport (PIS) than females at charity-linked hockey sporting events.	Gender → PIS	T-Tests	Not Supported
H3: Females are more supportive of women's sport and causes/charities (GSW) than are males.	Gender → GSW	T-Tests	Supported (with all samples, except event 1)
H4: Males are more supportive of men's sporting events and men's charitable/social causes (GSM) than are females.	Gender → GSM	T-Tests	Not Supported
H5a: Personal involvement (PI) has a direct and positive effect on perceived sponsor-event fit (FIT) in charity-linked sport settings.	PI → FIT	Correlation	Supported
H5b: Gender has a significant impact on the interaction of PI*FIT and the effect is greater for women.	Gender → PI*FIT	Comparison of Correlations	Supported (social-causes sample only) Not Supported (all-events, women's hockey, men's hockey)

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H6a: Personal involvement (PI) has a direct and positive effect on perceived sincerity (SINC) of the sponsor in charity-linked sport settings.	PI	→	SINC	Correlation	Supported
H6b: Gender has a significant impact on the interaction of PI *SINC and the effect is greater for women.	Gender	→	PI*SINC	Comparison of Correlations	Supported (all-events, men's hockey, cancer-causes, social-causes) Not Supported (women's hockey sample)
H7a: Personal involvement (PI) has a direct and positive effect on sponsorship response (INT, FAV, and/or USE) in charity-linked sport settings.	PI	→	INT FAV USE	Correlation	Supported
H7b: Gender has a significant impact on the interaction of PI*INT, PI*FAV, and PI*USE and the effect is greater for women.	Gender	→	PI*INT PI*FAV PI*USE	Comparison of Correlations	Supported (cancer-causes sample only) Not Supported (all-events, women's hockey, men's hockey, social-causes)
H8a: Perceived sponsor-event fit (FIT) has a direct and positive effect on sponsorship response (INT, FAV and/or USE) in charity-linked sport settings.	FIT	→	INT FAV USE	Correlation	Supported
H8b: Gender has a significant impact on the interaction of FIT*INT, FIT*FAV, and FIT*USE and the effect is greater for women.	Gender	→	FIT*INT FIT*FAV FIT*USE	Comparison of Correlations	Not Supported

H9a: Perceived sincerity (SINC) of the sponsor has a direct and positive effect on sponsorship response (INT, FAV and/or USE) in charity-linked sport settings.	SINC	→	INT FAV USE	Correlation	Supported
H9b: Gender has a significant impact on the interaction of SINC*INT, SINC*FAV, and SINC*USE and the effect is greater for women.	Gender	→	SINC*INT SINC*FAV SINC*USE	Comparison of Correlations	Not Supported
H10a: Gender support for women (GSW) has a direct and positive effect on women's sponsorship response (INT, FAV, and/or USE).	GSW (female sample)	→	INT FAV USE	Correlation	Supported
H10b: Gender support for women (GSW) has a greater influence on women's sponsorship response (INT, FAV, and/or USE) at female sporting events than at male sporting events.	GSW (female sample)	→	INT FAV USE (women's hockey)	Comparison of Correlations	Not Supported
H11: Direct sponsorship response (INT, FAV and/or USE) at charity-linked sporting events is stronger among female spectators than male spectators.	Gender	→	INT FAV USE	T-Tests	Supported (men's hockey at INT level, social causes and event 5 at all levels) Not Supported (all-events, women's hockey, cancer-causes, events 1-4)
Proposed Model - Consumer Processing of CRSS				Multiple Regression	Significant Fit of 39.8%

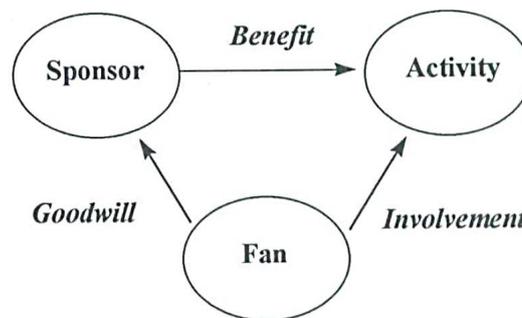
DISCUSSION OF THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This research contributes new and value-added insights to the current understanding of sponsorship marketing in four principle ways. These include: i) the focus on CRSS and the expanded platform of reciprocal exchange that this form of sponsorship entails, ii) a more rigorous understanding of personal involvement as a determinant of sponsorship response, iii) the addition of gender support as a new variable in understanding consumer behaviour in sponsorship, and iv) the testing of sponsorship effects from a gendered lens.

Expanded Platform of CRSS Reciprocal Exchange

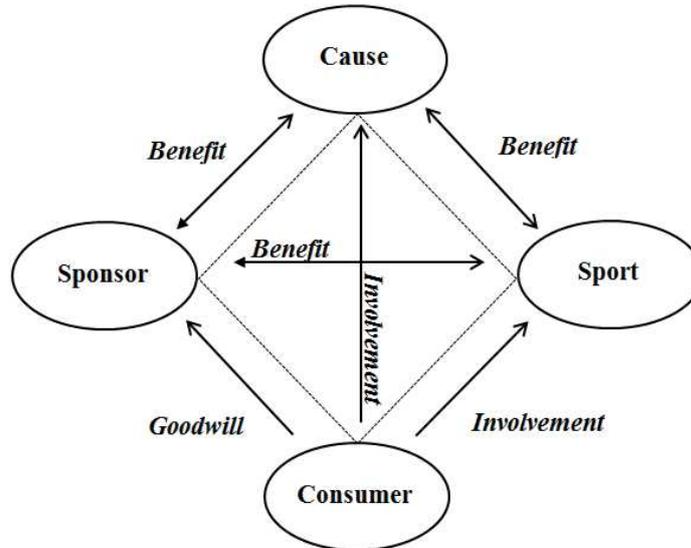
The merging of sport and cause is a growing reality of the sponsorship industry. Focusing on this hybrid form of sponsorship revealed a broader portrayal of the reciprocal relationships among multiple partners of sport and cause. In the context of sport, Meenaghan (2001) developed a triangular relationship framework for understanding the goodwill effect of fan involvement in sponsorship. In this presentation, the interaction among fans, sponsors and sport/activity was mediated by fan involvement with the activity, which generates “positive emotional orientation toward the sponsor who bestows benefit on the consumers’ favored activity” (Meenaghan 2001, p.106). This triangular relationship, presented in Figure 2, involves unidirectional relationships between all elements.

Figure 2: Goodwill Effects of Fan Involvement (Meenaghan, 2001, p.106)



The conceptual relationship suggested by Meenaghan (2001) was quantifiably verified in this current study. PI*SINC correlations were significant with all investigated samples (H6a). In this current study of CRSS, Meenaghan’s (2001) triangular relationship evolved from sponsor, activity/sport and fan to also include cause affiliations. The interaction between involved stakeholders was amplified in this scenario as consumers’ dual-involvement with both sport and cause expanded the potential for goodwill toward sponsors and shared benefits were broadened between the sponsor, charity/cause, and sport/event. As an extension to Meenaghan’s (2001) triangular relationship, Figure 3 presents the “Diamond of CRSS Goodwill” derived from this current study.

**Figure 3: Goodwill Effects of CRSS – Current Study
 (“Diamond of Goodwill”)**



The extended platform of engagement is represented by the diamond shape that unites consumer, sponsor, cause, and sport. The direction of relationships (represented by arrows) is also modified in this conceptual representation of goodwill effects in CRSS scenarios. Whereas Meenaghan (2001) indicated all unidirectional exchange (fan involved with activity; fan extends goodwill to sponsor; and sponsor benefits the activity), this expanded view recognizes mutual exchange and reciprocal return. Consumers’ one-way involvement with sport and sentiments of goodwill (or perceived sincerity) are maintained as per Meenaghan’s (2001) original depiction. A new involvement relationship is introduced as consumers are also connected with an affiliated cause. Reciprocal exchange (depicted as two-way arrows) captures the interaction between sponsors and sports; sponsors and causes; and causes and sports.

The review of sport and cause sponsorship literature identified the numerous benefits of such partnerships. For sponsors of sport, benefits may include strategic consumer targeting, the opportunity to

engage consumers, employees, and external stakeholders in an emotional and receptive state, the generation of goodwill, brand awareness, favourable brand image and preference, and consumer response in terms of sales revenue (Meenaghan 2001; Slåtten et al. 2017). The partnering sport property benefits mainly from funding and in-kind assistance as well as event profiling and sport promotion (Davis 2012). For sponsors of cause, the benefits are similar to sport (i.e., brand awareness, enhanced image, emotional engagement, goodwill and sales) with the added features of being able to display tangible acts of CSR and generating cause-linked publicity and meaningful differentiation from competing brands (Chang 2012; Close & Lacey 2013; Djaballah et al. 2017; Hyllegard et al. 2011). For the affiliated causes, the benefits are mainly funding, awareness, cause education and the recruitment of volunteers and donations (Bernardo 2011; Harvey & Strahilevitz 2009; Taylor & Shanka 2008). The final exchange is among sports and causes. For sport organizations the benefits of cause-associations include enhanced image, new audience reach, and

grassroots development of sport (Plewa & Quester 2011; Walker & Kent 2009). King (2001) referred to the NFL's Real Men Wear Pink campaign as an example of associating with a cause to reach a new (female) market and to improve a faulty brand/player image. Finally, sport can benefit cause (in similar ways as sponsors benefit causes) by extending mass audience reach, generating cause awareness and education, providing access to sponsors and incremental funding opportunities, offering an attractive outlet for corporations to promote their social goodness, and by linking charitable partners to emotionally charged sports fans (Smith & Westerbreek 2007; Walker & Kent 2009; Watt 2010).

Meenaghan, McLoughlin, and McCormack (2013) presented a broadened view of sponsorship that includes similar multi-stakeholder relationships. Although charitable affiliates are not explicitly examined among this list of expanded stakeholders, these authors bring further attention to a major development in the sponsorship industry. A more holistic approach to sponsorship is expanding organizational connections, objectives, and corresponding expectations of return. The "Diamond of Goodwill" is therefore an important reflection of these current industry dynamics. As sports and causes increasingly partner to deliver exponential return, there is a corresponding need to further the understanding of these relationships. The development of this framework is a substantial output of this current research and the foundation for future investigations.

More Rigorous Understanding of Personal Involvement

This study joins many published findings in supporting a direct and positive relationship between personal involvement and sponsorship response at all levels of consumer effect (i.e., INT, FAV, and USE). The layering of cause with sport however demanded a more robust treatment of the

construct of personal involvement. Earlier concepts of personal liking were broadened in this investigation to capture consumer connections with elements of both sport and cause. This approach revealed interesting insights concerning differences but also similarities between the involvement levels of women and men. The disparity between genders regarding both cause and sport/hockey connections was much less than originally presumed. Grouping individual event samples by both type of hockey (i.e., women's hockey versus men's hockey samples) and by type of affiliated cause (i.e., cancer causes versus social causes) revealed intriguing outcomes.

Women indicated greater involvement, interaction, and response to social causes while involvement with pink-themed cancer causes was comparable between genders. Breast cancer is no longer a women-only issue. In addition to the female patient, a breast cancer diagnosis has a notable impact on men. Whether it's their wife, sister, mother, relative, or friend, men are invested as supporters and co-survivors of breast cancer (Varner 2011). Most sport leagues have partnered with breast cancer as both a charitable act and a means of targeting a growing female fan base (Clark, Apostolopoulou, & Gladden 2009). Merging the masculinity of sports and the femininity of pink-marketed breast cancer (King 2001) has created a more level platform of cause engagement across genders as evidenced by the results of this investigation. This knowledge that women and men are equally invested in breast cancer initiatives presents sponsors with multiple targeting opportunities.

Given that both genders indicated strong involvement with cancer causes, it was interesting to discover that relative to the social-causes sample, this significant connection to cancer-causes had a weaker correlation to sponsorship response. This finding may be influenced by the saturation of pink efforts targeting consumers and

the increased scrutiny of such efforts often viewed as pink-washing (King 2006). There is a growing call to “think before you pink” (Twombly 2004, p.1736) as Harvey and Strahilevitz (2009) warn that the “overuse of the pink ribbon could potentially lead to visual saturation, with a decline or loss of the emotional and intellectual response” (p.30).

It is also worth noting that men had a weaker sponsorship response at the investigated women’s hockey events. With this particular sample, men’s personal involvement did not translate into significant sponsorship response at the higher levels of effect (i.e., FAV and USE). There was a loss of connection for these male fans between personal involvement levels and direct sponsorship response. This finding may also relate to the saturation of pink-themed events and the corresponding dilution of consumer impact. Gender support may have also shaped these findings as men’s support of women’s sport was found to be significantly less (than women’s) and in this case, may not have served as sufficient motivation for sponsor support at these higher levels of effect.

Contrary to expectations (H2), results of this study indicated that hockey involvement levels between surveyed men and women were not significantly different with any of the investigated samples. Certainly favourable bias toward the sport of hockey is expected to have influenced reported involvement levels as all research participants were intercepted as paid spectators of these various hockey events. Mere attendance suggests a certain level of involvement with the sport which contributes to high mean scores (women’s M=4.00, men’s M=4.04) but does not necessarily imply gender equivalence in response. The growth of women’s hockey in Canada is a probable justification for these comparable levels of gender involvement with hockey. Reported registration for female hockey has grown 130% since 1998 with almost 87,000 girls

and women currently participating in this sport (Hockey Canada 2016). The fact that women and men expressed comparable involvement in the stereotypical male sport of hockey is encouraging for promoters of women’s sport. The evolution of the women’s game presents promising opportunities for commercial support and a meaningful outlet to engage both genders of sports fans. This finding serves as notice that sponsorship properties should no longer be restricted to gender-tied lines.

Introduction of Gender Support

The inclusion of gender support as a potential influence on sponsorship response is another significant contribution of this study. In terms of sponsorship effects, there were no existing studies found that included elements of gender support as a possible determinant of sponsorship response. Given that the purpose of this investigation was to identify any significant gender effects in the sponsorship process, it was deemed necessary to introduce gender support as a potential motivation of female consumer response and to initiate discussion around this topic. Gender support for women (GSW) was treated as a consumer factor and measured in terms of general support for women’s sports and women’s causes. Similarly, gender support for men was measured in terms of general support for men’s sports and men’s causes. Responses to these variables were collected from both female and male research participants.

Based on the reviewed literature, gender solidarity was expected to be observed by both genders. In other words, the expectation of this study was that women would mostly support women (H3) and that men would mostly support men (H4). H3 was supported as results from this study did in fact confirm stronger GSW among female respondents (M=4.41) than male respondents (M=3.99). Consistent with the findings of Ridinger and Funk

(2006), the magnitude of the difference between sentiments of GSW between genders was greatest among spectators of women's hockey. Women's support of their own gender was strongest at women's hockey games. This finding suggests that sponsors targeting female consumers may effectively leverage the passion of gender solidarity through association with female sports.

H4 anticipated similar results for men whereby gender solidarity would be ascertained through stronger expressions of support for men's sports and causes by men. This presumption was proven wrong. In fact, the opposite was revealed as women expressed significantly stronger support than men, not only for women's sports and causes but also for men's. For the all-events sample, women's GSM response (M=4.25) was significantly stronger than men's (M=4.02).

This new consideration for gender support established that women support both women (M=4.41) and men (M=4.25). Having said this however, women ultimately support women more than they do men. Women (of this study) indicated that they care most for their own gender. What remains unknown is whether these feelings of gender solidarity manifest into favourable sponsorship response and if this effect is stronger at women's CRSS events than at men's CRSS events. These were the issues explored in H10a and H10b. Focusing strictly on the female segment of respondents, the direct relationship between gender support for women and sponsorship response was investigated and confirmed as significant at all levels of response. H10a was therefore supported. The final test regarding gender support was to determine if the gender of the sport being played impacted the strength of women's sponsorship response. H10b anticipated that gender solidarity would manifest more strongly at women's events and that this would result in more

favourable sponsorship response than at men's events. A comparison of female responses between the women's hockey spectators and men's hockey spectators revealed no significant differences in sponsorship response based on the gender of sport being played. H10b was therefore not supported. While recorded GSW was stronger for women at female events, the corresponding impact on sponsorship response was not significantly different and therefore not dependent on the gender of sport being played.

Unlike other variables in the proposed model of this study (such as involvement, fit and sincerity), gender support was approached in a more exploratory fashion. Observations of differences between genders and the impact of gender support on sponsorship response are sufficient to engage further discussion on the importance of this consideration in the consumer processing of sponsorship programs. As hybrid forms of sponsorship continue to develop (such as sports and cause, festivals and sports, arts and causes, etc.), the potential basis of gender support also broadens. Sponsors therefore have increased opportunity to establish shared relevance and consumer engagement.

Testing of Sponsorship Effects from a Gendered Lens

Many efforts are made to identify differences between genders. In the reviewed literature gender differences were highlighted with regards to physicality, information processing, decision-making, priorities and interests, sport consumption, charitable giving and gender support. The original intent of this inquiry was to follow these tendencies of distinguishing genders through differences. The findings from this research suggest that in the context of CRSS, women and men may be more similar than they are different.

Involvement with pink-themed cancer causes, involvement with the sport of hockey, and the significance of PI, FIT,

and SINC on sponsorship response were all similar across genders. The most noteworthy gender differences found through this study involved social causes, perceived sincerity and gender support. At social-cause affiliated events, women's PI had a greater impact on perceptions of sponsor-event fit. Gender in isolation of other mediating variables, was not a significant predictor of consumer response for all, but the social-causes group. For this sample, women's response at all levels of effect was significantly greater than men's. The most consistent gender difference observed across all sample treatments was women's greater PI*SINC scores. When women are connected to a sponsored event, they are more likely to perceive the sponsor as being sincere in their motives to contribute to the event and affiliated causes.

Understanding differences allows marketers to be effective in developing strategies that best resonate with multi-targeted consumers. Recognizing similarities, however, also allows marketers to be more efficient by combining segments with common needs and behaviours (Crane et al. 2017). Based on the examined findings of this study, the impact of gender is highly contextual and is reflective of complex relationships that are not only based on difference, but also on equally significant similarities between genders.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings of this research, several practical suggestions are proposed. These are presented in terms of marketing to women through CRSS, marketing to men through CRSS, and general sponsorship recommendations.

Marketing to Women through CRSS

Sponsor-event fit was the strongest predictor of women's response to sponsorship. In order to establish acceptable perceived fit, sponsors must first align with congruent partners. Congruency

can be based on several factors including functional or image-based fit. This fit should be clearly articulated to consumers through aggressive sponsorship activation programs. Given women's significantly higher involvement with social causes, sponsors should seek such affiliations when targeting a female audience and ensure that these partnerships are sufficiently promoted. All sponsor's actions must be genuine and transparent in order to strengthen women's perceptions of sponsor sincerity. Although not significantly proven, findings from this study implied that perceptions of sincerity may impact women mainly at the higher levels of effect (i.e., affection and behaviour). In this case, sponsor messaging should be emotionally-based with a possible call-to-action.

Gender solidarity was found to be strong among women. Sponsors can tap into this emotional space by supporting women's sports and causes and genuinely promoting these associations. Having said this, women's response to sponsorship was consistent across both women's and men's investigated events. Sponsors should therefore not limit themselves to women's sports and causes and can instead consider broader opportunities to engage women. Comparable gender involvement with the sport of hockey reported in this study supports the proposition that women are actively engaged in sports beyond the traditional female-oriented activities. The risk of pink-saturation was also implied through the findings of this study. The suggestion made here to sponsors is not to avoid pink-themed event sponsorship but rather to expand consideration beyond simply stereotypical female events and sports. Resonance can be derived from sources other than gender.

Marketing to Men through CRSS

Given the many similarities confirmed between genders, the fit, sincerity, and activation related suggestions (made above) for marketing to women are equally

applicable to a male audience. One noted difference is that the effect of sincerity on men was suggested to be strongest at the level of cognition. Given this finding, a more rational communication approach could be used to establish sincerity with men. Men indicated significantly greater involvement with cancer-cause affiliated events (versus social-causes). Sponsors seeking to engage a male audience should therefore prioritize cancer causes over social causes. This study was limited in its consideration of only two broad types of causes. There are many other causes (such as education, animal welfare, environment, etc.) that are available to sponsors and event organizers for the purpose of partnership. Male respondents reported strong involvement with both cause and sport. Sponsors of charity-linked hockey events can therefore leverage either of these properties in their promotional efforts. Given that men's reported involvement with sport was higher than cause, messaging priority for a male audience should first be given to the sponsored sport. In this study, the interaction of sponsorship predictors was somewhat diluted for men when attending female hockey games. While it was recommended that targeting women through sponsorship not be confined by gender lines, in the case of men, continuing to sponsor traditional male (or gender neutral) sports may remain most effective.

General Sponsorship Recommendations

Regardless of gender, sponsors should connect with their targeted consumers through points of relevance. The merging of sport and cause effectively expands the platform for consumer engagement. Meaningful connections can be made through affiliations with sport and/or through cause. Marketers must understand their consumers at deeper levels than simply gender. It is essential to recognize and respond to significant gender differences in order to effectively satisfy the needs of different consumer segments. Equally

important is the need to seek and accept gender similarities in developing common marketing strategies.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

Limitations of this current study should be kept in mind when interpreting results. Whetten (1989) cautioned that "meaning is derived from context" (p.492). In order to accurately capture research results, we must first acknowledge where and when data was collected. In the case of this study, the common denominator across all tested venues was cause-linked hockey events. The inclusion of both men's and women's hockey allowed for interesting comparisons that contributed to gender findings. The consistency of hockey however did restrict findings to this one sport. Geographic coverage spanned three different Canadian cities however these were all Ontario-based. Given this one sport and one province coverage, findings cannot be generalized to other sports or geographic markets without further collaborating research. The number of affiliated causes provided more breadth than did sport by including four different charitable organizations. These were grouped by themes of cancer and social-related causes for the purpose of data analysis and discussion. Again, this treatment of samples allowed for insightful comparisons and new discoveries but findings are limited to these specific types of causes and are unable to be extended to charitable causes beyond this particular scope of inquiry.

The inclusion of cause-related issues can elicit social desirability response bias when relying on self-reported data (Hyllegard et al. 2011). A bias such as this could inflate favourable response. Field based studies also introduce uncontrollable factors that can influence respondents. For instance, at Event #4 the research table was set up in a high traffic entrance that was very cold. In this setting respondents appeared rushed to complete the survey.

In comparison, at Event #5, the research station was located near the concession area where long waiting lines may have encouraged more thoughtful response. As is common practice in the sponsorship literature, the behavioural measures were based on intentions and not actual behaviour. It is acknowledged that there are many situations in which intentions do not accurately predict actual behaviour.

DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The framework originally developed by Speed and Thompson (2000) and later extended by Alay (2008), has been further advanced through this study of CRSS and gender comparisons. The scope of this investigation was purposely broad in order to extend the boundaries of sponsorship knowledge. This included measuring the influence of multiple consumer and sponsorship variables (gender, gender support, involvement with sport, involvement with cause, sponsor-event fit, and perceived sincerity of the sponsor) on three levels of sponsorship response (interest, favourability, and use), with four levels of sample analysis (i.e., all events, type of hockey, type of cause, event specific). As a follow-up to this study, a tighter scope of particular elements of this model could offer additional depth of understanding.

Gender support as an influence in consumer processing of sponsorship was introduced in this study. Further efforts are needed to better understand the role of this variable from the perspective of both genders. Sources of gender solidarity (sport, cause, or other) could also be explored and measured in terms of influence in the sponsorship process. Consumer response measured along the hierarchy of effects could also be re-examined in terms of gender differences to substantiate suggestions that women's engagement may be more affective while men's may be more cognitive.

The extent to which these findings are applicable to other sports, causes, and geographical markets should also be empirically examined. Cause considerations should extend beyond the two broad types (i.e., cancer and social) considered in this study. Piper & Schnepf (2007) found that women had greater support for causes that involved animals, education and the elderly while men preferred to support sports and recreational causes. Consideration for these and other topical causes (such as the environment or mental health) would be of significant value in advancing cause-related sponsorship knowledge.

Sponsorship response can be impacted by many variables beyond the current scope of investigation. Among others, these could include further demographic variables, sponsorship portfolios, duration of partnerships, competitive activity, or sponsorship activation. Sponsorship activation was commonly noted throughout this paper as a key factor in sponsorship response. The addition of this variable to the current predictors of sponsorship outcomes would inject an additional level of understanding.

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